

Back Again, Back Again: No Confusion Between Us

CW: This episode contains descriptions of violence, mild gore, and emotional manipulation/abuse.

Abigail: Hey guys. Before we get to the listener limericks and the episode, I want to take a moment to address the June 24th, 2022 Supreme Court decision to overturn Roe versus Wade. This decision stripped away the right to have a safe and legal abortion.

Everyone should have the freedom to decide what's best for themselves and their families, including when it comes to ending a pregnancy. This decision has dire consequences for individual health and safety, and could have harsh repercussions for other landmark decisions.

Restricting access to comprehensive reproductive care, including abortion, threatens the health and independence of all Americans.

Learn more by visiting [podvoices dot help](https://podvoices.org). If you're able to support others, please consider donating to abortion funds. I encourage you to speak up, take care, and spread the word.

Before we begin the finale, we have a little listener limerick! If you, too, would like a funky little limerick

written for you and read out on the show about an (arguably) pg-13 topic of your choice, you, too, can go to Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast or click the link in the description to jump directly to the page. This limerick is for Miguel, about fishmongers.

I knew of a fishmonger blue,
When sad, on fish bones he'd chew
His friends soon caught on
And with the help of a prawn
They got him some therapy, too.

And - onto the finale. In show context, this one is a little heavy, so please check out the content warnings at the end of the episode description before listening. Stay safe.

[**FX:** voices chatter in the background. Music begins, a simple repeating pattern, bright and cheery. It is "Nightingales" by Pierce Murphy.]

Abigail, as the intro: Back Again, Back Again, episode thirty-two: No Confusion Between Us.

[**FX:** Music fades out. A click of a cassette tape-style recorder turns on, and the machine begins to whirr underneath the rest of the audio.]

Ilyaas: I thought Cassian was good.

Gods. I thought Cassian was good. I thought I could change him, that with enough *time* I could pull him away from the idea of being king. I believed - I *did* - that if we spent enough nights under the stars and midnights getting drunk and telling stories and talking about the future that one day he would wake up and have a Zuko redemption arc. I daydreamed about that, him and Rhia and I running away to the *fretim* and raising an army. The details were never too clear. Sometimes Cassian was my soldier, sometimes Rhia became the poet, sometimes the *rex et poeta et soldat* were people entirely. Once we met Leander, they were always there, too. The important part had been that we were together, and we were free, and we were happy.

But -- that dream was always going to be sepia-tinged, a nostalgia for something that never was.

Because Cassian spent seventeen years preparing to be king. And when you base everything you are around that, it takes more than a little bit of *traem* the drink and *traem* the feeling to give it up.

When I woke up, I'd been barricaded into a room that was not the one Rhia and I shared - they'd been smart enough to not put me in my own room, where I had my sword and my armor and my wits. This one was a spare: an empty bed frame and a dresser and nothing much else. There was a window, but no gables on which to climb out onto. There was a door, of course, but the fact that I didn't see any locks on my side of it made me think that there were just a great quantity on the outside. Did they have guest rooms for political prisoners? It wouldn't've surprised me.

The back of my head ached from where one of the soldiers had hit me. There was a crick in my neck from how I'd been slumped across the floor. Maybe it was a stupid thing to remember, amidst all the chaos of that day but -- all the same. There it was.

More importantly, my hands were bound behind me. I was gagged. I'd used my magic to hurt their prince -- I was something feral, now. They were taking no chances with me.

It wasn't much longer before the door creaked open, and a soldier stuck his head through. *Get the kings*, he said in Rhysean. *She's awake*.

I struggled to my feet. *I will not face the queen on my knees*, I resolved. *I will look her in the eyes. I will not bow*.

The door unlatched. The queen swept in, a retinue of soldiers at her back. Io stood off her left shoulder. Cassian,

looking haggard, stood off her right. Both of them were dressed in finery -- midnight blue and gold. Io had drawn tiny golden stars beneath each of his eyes with what looked to be the same stuff Cassian and I smeared across our faces before battle. A crown sat across Cassian's brow, crooked as always, but listing farther to one side than it ever normally did. Io looked like he was meant to take up space. Cassian, for the first time since I'd met him, looked like he wanted to disappear. He wouldn't meet my eyes.

Io did, though. His face was almost impassive -- almost. Something sparked in his eyes -- not confusion or anger, but... amusement.

Snake, I thought, but didn't make a sound, determined not to lose my dignity so soon. *Rhia*, I wanted to ask. She wasn't in here with me. *What did you do to Rhia*.

Would asking betray my affections? Was I already too far gone for it to be a surprise?

The queen cleared her throat.

The day will go like this, the queen said. *We will remove this gag. We will untie your hands. You will speak in Rhysean if you say anything at all, so the poet understands. You will not call any magic to you. If I hear a language other than Rhysean, the Menstrana de Eligida will lose a hand. If you raise a weapon or whisper magic against anyone in this castle, the Menstrana de*

will lose an eye. She does not have many of either, and if we make it that far, the consequences will be much worse. I say this in the language of the book so that there is no confusion between us. If you claim to not understand my meaning, I will beat the insolence from you. But of course - there will be no violence as long as you do as you are told. Nod to show to me that you understand.

I nodded -- what else could I have done? -- and Hildegarde stepped forward, pulling the gag from my mouth and untying my wrists. If it had just been me on the line, I don't think I would have stopped myself from letting out a perfect Rhysean *fuck you* -- but the queen had Rhia, and I had cost her enough already. I kept my mouth shut.

What would it have been like for Rhia, if I'd never come? She would have trained another girl to speak English after her; she would have stayed friends with Cassian. Maybe she would have run away with Iolo, or spent every night of her life on a rooftop or in a tavern until she grew so old she couldn't climb onto the trellis to do either.

I'd already cost her enough. So I sucked in a breath, put on the politest tone I could manage, and said, in Rhysean, *I... I would like to see Rhia, my king. Please.*

Io smirked, a flicker across his face and gone. Cassian stared resolutely over my shoulder.

The queen's voice was light. *Not yet. There are many things to be done before we could entertain that idea, Eligida.*

Like? I fought to keep my voice calm, even though I wanted to snap the word, lift my hands and call the magic and force them to take me to Rhia. I tried to meet Cassian's gaze again -- *gods*, amidst all of it, I was still sorry I'd hurt him. Even though the larger part of me said *look what he's done, this is why you're here* -- you don't stop loving someone. Not after one betrayal -- or two, or three. It went both ways, the love and the hurt. He wouldn't look at me -- that's how I knew he still cared. I wanted him to look at me -- and there was my tell. Game over.

Like the presentation of the chosen three, said Io, stars flashing as he bared his teeth. *To the public. There is still a festival in the city, soldat, until we stop it with a word.*

Captain, the queen said, and Hildegarde straightened.

King.

Help the Eligida dress. Ensure that she does not do anything... irrational. Meet us down by the steps.

A soldier brought in a dress, and all but Hildegarde vacated the room - Cassian still not looking at me, Io staring, and staring, and staring. She closed the door behind the party with a sick *thud* and turned back to face me, one hand loose on her sword. Watching to be sure I didn't -- I don't even know.

Where could I have run to that wouldn't have hurt someone else? There was a girl downstairs somewhere that I loved, so much, and she was my other tell. Game over.

I dressed. I pulled the pins out of my hair, little gold things with flowers on their ends, and tried to rearrange it all into something at least half-put together. I made a half-hearted attempt to ask for my sword, trying to quell some of the tension that throbbed in the back of my head -- though most of it, I was sure, was from where Hildegard had absolutely clobbered me.

Which she hadn't seemed particularly put out about, either.

I was denied my sword. A false one was handed to me in its place - bare of any design, too big for me and unwieldy in my grip. I supposed they knew that if they allowed me back to mine, there was no way that I'd be letting go of it again - and there would be no way for them to pry it from me as only I could lift it. I took the false sword, oddly balanced and cheap, and followed the kings and Io down the stairs.

We stood on the steps of the palace, the very place we had glowered down from after riding back in from that first battle. Then, my arm had ached from my stab wound as I'd raised my true sword -- the queen had forced me to perform then, too. There was a nice narrative symmetry to it, I suppose. I was just as useless the second time as I was the first.

See your rex et poeta et soldat, the queen said. They will right this world.

As if we weren't the ones that kept it broken.

We raised our swords. And in the crowd, I caught the eye of Iolo, anger dark on her brow. Storms in her eyes. No -- worry. Worry in her face. *Rhia*, it said. *What has happened to Rhia?*

She'd been there when Rhia was dragged out. Had she fought back against the soldiers? Probably not, if she was out there instead of sequestered away to the annals of this castle. Had Rhia seen them coming, the soldiers, and had a sick sort of premonition as to why? Had she used her last moments before they reached her to whisper fiercely to Iolo to not fight back? To kiss her hand?

Rhia, Iolo's eyes demanded.

And I didn't know when I'd have a chance to tell her again -- if ever. I was theirs for as long as Rhia was theirs. I had done her enough harm -- but I didn't trust the queen to keep her word. And I didn't trust myself to keep her safe -- I would never be their perfect soldier. And if there was a chance that I could stop Rhia from suffering because of it --

I cringed, thinking of queen's words. *If you claim to not understand my meaning, I will beat the insolence from you.* My only wild thought of how to let Io know Rhia was in trouble - it was not English, it was not magic, it was not violence, the

three things that would make Rhia hurt, but I knew - I *knew* - that what the queen had meant was, *do not step over the line, or I will force you back across it*. If I was caught and I could not sell this lie, this was insolence.

But I healed fast. If it came to that, I would be fine. With my free hand, eyes locked onto Iolo, I made the gesture that I'd had made at me a thousand times, now. Shoulder-shoulder-out, fingers crossed like a broken promise, small as I could, pointed at Iolo. *Rhia*, I mouthed. *Help her*, I couldn't risk mouthing. *Send us help*.

I didn't know how else to make her understand that I was asking her for a favor - a plea, a call to the *fretim* - without the sign, a gesture of giving away power. Of asking for help. Meant to say, *please fix this*, meant to say, *you are as brave as I wish I was*.

And then Cassian and Io were lowering their swords so I rushed to, as well, missing Iolo in the crowd for just a second and hoping, desperately, that she got my message. That she understood, and was seeking help, and that they could get Rhia out.

But Iolo wasn't the only one that had seen. The queen's gaze locked onto my hand as it trailed back down to my side, and I swallowed hard.

The ceremony dragged on. Io got laurels, I got laurels, Cassian knelt before his parents and promised things that the sound of my heartbeat drowned out. There's a particular kind of sick that bubbles up inside of you when you know you're waiting to get the shit slapped out of you, and I was far from certain that I would be given a chance to explain myself. The second we were out of the sight of the people in the courtyard, the queen yanked me back by my arm and struck me across the face.

I stumbled, hitting my knees hard - I hadn't expected retaliation that *fast*. Cassian shouted something that sounded like *mother* -- he hadn't seen the gesture I'd made to Iolo.

What did you think that would do? She hissed. *Who were you trying to signal?*

I brought my hand up to my lip to gently prod where the queen had struck me, and winced when my fingers came away tipped with blood. Her stupid fucking *rings* --

That's going to leave a mark, I muttered in English, too low for the queen to count against me. In shitty Rhysean, I asked, *how will you explain this to the people?* Something more like -- *this, you will tell people?*

Training accident, she said smoothly. *However, I would not worry about you having to explain anything to them for quite some time. What were you trying to do with your ridiculous act of dissent?*

To give respect, I managed, the words thick around my split lip. *To the people, my king.*

Hmm. There was a note of warning to her voice, and I pressed my tongue to the roof of my mouth, bracing myself for violence. I And then, *that is not your place.*

She flicked her hand and swept away, her dress swirling as she whirled around and started down the stairs. Relief hit me like a train – that was the end of it, that had been the end of it – until she turned, again, and cocked her head.

Well, eligida? Aren't you coming?

I stood, shakily, as I was divested of even that stupid shitty sword, then trailed the queen down the stairs, down the hall and to a stairwell that curved and curved and curved until the thought of sunlight had been left a few hundred feet above us.

The dungeons.

The -- cellars. Not the real dungeons -- those weren't kept in the same building as the royal family, too much to lose -- no one wanted a murderer running around the palace – but a small set of cells, special for those the kings wanted to hide away.

Rhia lay crumpled on the floor, dress tangled around her knees, one arm thrown over her head. It was cold down here, different than the well-heated palace above us. It was enough to

prickle your skin -- Rhia already ran cold. I knew if I could grab her hands, they'd be ice.

But Rhia. She'd let me see Rhia. A reminder? Of what I had to lose? I stumbled forward, but the queen held up a hand to stop me. I didn't dare to push my luck.

Menstrana, the queen said. Rhia didn't stir -- her chest rose and fell -- she was alive. *Menstrana de*.

As if she were in a trance, Rhia sat up, slowly, flowers still caught and crumpled in her hair from the feast. She stared straight ahead, seeing everything seeing nothing, and then finally, finally, looked towards us.

The queen motioned for the guards to open the cell door, and the bits of relief curdled in my stomach. *Menstrana de, do you know what your Eligida did?*

And then, as if they'd practiced -- as if this was a thing they did every day, torture and torment and blackmail -- Hildegard and Tavius - the captain of the guard and the lieutenant, people I'd shared meals and campfires and starlit nights with -- grabbed Rhia and pinned her to the ground. Tavius put one knee on her chest, grabbing her wrists. Hildegard slammed Rhia's head to the ground and held it steady, one hand pressing against her forehead, the other one on her neck.

The queen drew a long, slender knife from the folds of her dress and stepped towards Rhia.

Both of our reactions were visceral. Rhia slammed her weight around, bucking like a wild horse, trying to throw Tavius's weight from her chest. I lunged forward, hands sliding past each other so they began to glow, but Cassian caught me around my waist and then Io was in front of me, wolf's grin, stupid fucking gold-painted nails digging into my wrists as he slammed my hands together and down.

Careful, soldat, he said. Cassian was silent.

The queen stepped closer. Rhia's sob was muffled. I was not noble and I was not brave. *You aren't supposed to hurt her,* I screamed. *It's me. It's me. I didn't break your rules.*

Her words were soft: *raise your hand, Rhia loses an eye.* She knelt, refined, and positioned the thin blade over Rhia's face.

That wasn't what you'd said, I begged. *It's insolence - it's me - it wasn't anything, I didn't mean anything -*

And the queen, almost delicately, slid the blade into her eye.

You know what screaming sounds like. You don't need to know what a face looks like, after that.

And maybe you know, somewhat, what apologies feel like, bundled up in your chest. But I could not, in that moment, remember the stupid *fucking* Rhysean word for *sorry*, and saying it in English would have cost her the other half of her sight.

I retched. Io swore and shoved at me, disgusted - I stumbled, slamming to my knees. The queen wiped the blade along Rhia's dress and stood. She glanced down at me, still fucking serene, and the barest wisp of a smile slid across her face as we both realized I was kneeling before her.

So you do know deference, then, she said, in English. *Good little soldat.*

Rhia whimpered - god, no, it wasn't a whimper, it was - worse. So much worse.

But - now my hands were free. From where I kneeled, I breathed in, and out, and slid my hands past each other. *Furums et peril anil*, I whispered, and threw my arms wide.

The room caught on fire. The queen, Hidlegarde, Tavius - Cassian - were knocked backwards, slamming into the walls. I had a path to Rhia. I lunged towards her - *break*, I willed, grabbing at the chain around her ankle, but I didn't know the Rhysean word for it, and the magic refused to respond. *Goddamnit, break.*

The wood beams of the ceiling were on fire. The queen's dress was on fire. Hildegarde was on fire, and Cassian was back on his feet, moving towards Rhia and I in the perfect untouched circle around us. *Break*, I tried, in English again, voice cracking. *Break, please.* Rhia wasn't conscious any longer - god, I couldn't blame her, but we were almost out of time, because I

didn't know what Cassian would do, but she was half my head and

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*Rotar, Cassian said, so quietly I almost didn't hear him.
To break. Rotar.*

I whipped my head around. I thought I'd known every expression he could make, but this one was - new. It was - uncertainty. It was - his heart cracking.

Get her out, Ilyaas. She deserves more, he said. But remember who we are. Come back.

I stared at him for what felt like forever. I knew, if someone had held a mirror up before me, I'd have seen his expression reflected back on my own face. I didn't know how he could be so obtuse - to just miss the point. To look at this, everything burning around him, and think, *This is wrong, but I am not the thing that must change in it. This is wrong, but I am not something that needs to be fixed.*

Seventeen years, though, is a lot of conditioning to undo.

Come with me, I tried, finally. You told me once that if I'd asked, you'd follow me anywhere. So come with me.

And then - noise, from upstairs. An alarm bell ringing. We both stiffened as guards began to shout, as footsteps pounded down the stairs.

Don't be foolish, Ilyaas, he said, and drew his sword. You know that wasn't what I'd intended. Get her out, before I realize how stupid we're being.

Rotaril, I whispered, and the chain snapped. I heaved Rhia to her feet, and began to pull her up the stairs. Cassian didn't look away as we climbed.

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The rest of our escape went something like this: the *fretim* had broken into the palace. Iolo found me, Rhia limp in my arms halfway up the stairs - she and a group of others had cut their way through to us, and then she had an arm around Rhia, too, hauling her upwards until we reached the entryway. The great stairwell was behind us. All was chaos - a battle in the palace, a battle in the heart of this place I called home.

We were almost to the door when I felt the pull in my gut - it wasn't a *pull*, though. It was a *yank* - someone grabbing hold of my stomach and twisting. My vision blurred - it took all my effort not to double over, to keep Rhia upright.

The ringing moved into my chest.

My sword, I gasped, not for surprise but for lack of breath. We have to go back. We have to go find it.

Iolo swore at me, trying to keep moving, but I was rooted to the spot. My blood hummed, and all noise of battle faded into a sharp, clear whistle.

I turned around.

Flying down the stairs, *my sword* in her hands, was - a girl.

Her nose was bloody, a snarl marred her face - and as she slammed the pommel of my sword - *my sword*, the one that was *too much* for anyone else to touch, *too much* for anyone else to pick up - she whipped her head up. Her eyes locked onto mine.

The world froze. The world burned.

There was only one reason I could dream up for why she was able to do that.

Soldier, my brain supplied. *King*.

And then everything was moving again, Iolo shouting at me to *move*, to *take Rhia and move*, and the girl was flying towards us, glowing, glowing, and tossed me my sword. I fumbled for it, barely catching, and she grinned, sharper than a knife's point.

This is not how Rhia intended for us to meet, Eligidida, but it will do. she said in Rhysean, and then she drew two short swords from her back and set herself into fighting stance. *My name is Callia. Let's burn this place to the fucking ground.*

Abigail, as the Outro: This has been season one of Back Again, Back Again. Season two will begin November first, 2022.

[**FX:** The whirr of the cassette machine fades out. "Nightingales" once more fades in, just as cheerfully.]

Back Again, Back Again, is written and produced by me, Abigail Eliza. If you're thinking November is an awfully long time away, stop by on the first of every month for a bonus episode - or check us out on Instagram and Tumblr @BackAgainPodcast or on Tik Tok @AbigailElizaWrites - I'm going absolutely nowhere. If you feel so inclined, you can donate to Back Again, Back Again on KoFi at [Ko-Fi.com/BackAgainPodcast](https://ko-fi.com/BackAgainPodcast), or click the link in the description, where, if you leave an arguably PG-13 topic in the description box, I'll write you a terrible little limerick in return. Of course, you'll also win my eternal affection and gratitude.

This show wouldn't have been possible without more people than I can fit into the timepsan of Pierce Murphy's Nightingales, which was, of course, retrieved from [FreeMusicArchive.org](https://freemusicarchive.org) and is licensed under an attribution license, but I'll try. To Chloe, my soldier, for letting me borrow your mic when we first came to uni and for being so unapologetically proud of the things that you create that it makes me want to yell about mine, too. You are brilliant. Half my heart belongs to you. To Ella, my king, for always rewatching Narnia with me and all of the bread-and-cheese dinner nights.

Thank you for everything, and everything, and everything, but especially all the times you played the guitar in our tiny little dorm room. Terry living was not ideal living, but you made it something great. Thanks for signing another lease with me.

To all of the card-carrying Milk Bilbo members. I love you.

To Nat, for knowing more about BABA lore than I do and playing a not insignificant role in this show's November revival from the grave. Your flower crowns are the coolest ever. To Ira, for the fanart and for being one of the first BABA fans, and Joy, and Rose, and Cas, and Cup, and Zoey, and Jupiter, and Em, and MJ, and Aerin, and Halo, and Morgan, and Annie, and Isaac, and everyone, everyone, everyone who has taken the time to listen to this silly little show and yell about it with me. Another thank you to everyone who has made fanart or written fic or made pinterest boards or tumblr posts or playlists. I cannot believe that this is real. I can't believe this is my life.

I know we've passed the longest day of the year, now, up in this northern hemisphere, and sometimes that feels like a condemnation, that steady march back towards the dark. But it is still summer, now, and I hope that if you feel your throat closing at the thought of tomorrow that you can tip your head up towards the sun or the stars and find at least a second of peace in this day. You have made it through before, and I am so proud

of you for facing it again. I love you, I love you, I love you.

I hope you have a wonderful day.